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The thin line
between leadership and mediocrity
Can Ukraine become a role model in fighting disinformation?

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After more than three years of debunking Kremlin "fake news", Ukraine does not have a perfect track record in countering manipulation. Yet, the country has made enough progress to be treated by other Eastern Partnership countries as a possible example on how to approach the issue of fighting disinformation and developing strategic communication. Non-governmental actors in Ukraine have achieved a level of experience and excellency that would be interesting for any organization dealing with Kremlin propaganda, fact-checking or media literacy. However, these organizations would need more international publicity to raise their visibility.

Introduction

"Fake news" has been officially named word of the year by Collins English Dictionary and will be included in the next print edition of the dictionary.[1] The word, which has no precise meaning but generally describes information that has been either fabricated or manipulated, has witnessed a surge in popularity in 2017, mostly in the aftermath of the United States presidential election. On the one hand, it has been widely discussed that sources connected to Russia meddled in the U.S.

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[1] 'Fake news' named Collins Dictionary's official Word of the Year for 2017, *Independent*, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/fake-news-word-of-the-year-2017-collins-dictionary-donald-trump-kellyanne-conway-antifa-corbynmania-a8032751.html

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election by flooding social media with manipulated information and sponsored ads aimed at polarizing American society. On the other hand, U.S. President Donald Trump, who is considered the biggest beneficiary of the manipulated stories produced by Russian sources as the vast majority of such stories were tailored to his favor, uses the term "fake news" in a very different context. He has often called any information that might present him in a negative light "fake news". Such accusations have been directed at, among others, CNN, *The New York Times*, the U.S. Democratic Party and even some fellow Republicans.

In Europe, "fake news" gained momentum due to a series of elections and referendums in which manipulated information is considered to have played an important role in misleading public opinion. This includes events such as the elections in France, Netherlands, and to a lesser extent, Germany, and the referendums on Brexit and Catalonian independence. In all cases, Russian sources are believed to have been involved in manipulation and disinformation.

The modern use of "fake news," which involves a coordinated action on both online and offline media platforms but is largely concentrated on the internet, was widely noticed for the first time when the Kremlin propaganda machine played a crucial part in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which erupted in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and engaged in war in Donbas. The internet was flooded with fake news and manipulated information aimed at showing that the people who supported the Revolution of Dignity and the politicians who came to power after president Yanukovych fled the country were a true danger not only to "normal" Ukrainians but to Russians and even others, including the EU. For more than three years now, Ukraine has been under constant shelling - in real terms as

well as by Kremlin propaganda.

But there is also another side to the "information warfare" between Ukraine and Russia. Ukrainians now have more than three years of experience in debunking fake news and uncovering the mechanisms for spreading manipulated information. As a consequence, among Ukrainian civil society activists, experts and politicians, knowledge of how Kremlin propaganda actually works and how to counter it often exceeds the knowledge and experience of their counterparts from the Eastern Partnership countries, the European Union or the USA. This opens a vast field for potential cooperation for sharing this know-how between Ukraine and other countries. Ukraine – in an unlikely role reversal in its relations with the West – could be a source of knowledge that can help other countries to monitor and address disinformation. Despite Ukraine being experienced and likely more than capable of providing others its fair share of knowledge on countering disinformation, the notion of considering it a role model remains unpopular, even among countries which have already recognized the threat of the Kremlin's manipulations. A series of factors, such as a controversial national disinformation strategy, and de facto instrumentalization of information policy for its own purposes by the Ukrainian ruling elite as well as limited recognition for Ukrainian "anti-manipulation" initiatives have also contributed to the fact that Ukraine's case of countering propaganda is worth analyzing, but not always worth following.

Status quo: belated and controversial, yet making progress

Members of Ukrainian civil society and Ukrainian officials have been indicating Russia's propaganda machine as one of the key elements of its hybrid warfare since 2014. Dmytro Shulkin, deputy head of Ukraine's presidential administration, told the *Financial Times* in October 2017 that,

already back in 2015, Ukraine warned Facebook and the U.S. administration that Russia is spreading disinformation on social media.[2] Even though Ukrainian officials have undertaken actions to inform other countries that Russian information warfare is a real threat, their actions were not underpinned with an effective, fully-fledged strategy. It was only in February 2017 that Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko approved the Information Security Doctrine,[3] a strategic document adopted with the purpose of effectively addressing security threats faced by Ukraine. Although work on the Doctrine had started much earlier – the first draft of the strategy was discussed during public consultations already in mid-2015[4] – it took Ukrainian politicians almost three years (counting from the annexation of Crimea by Russia), despite awareness that information about Ukraine is manipulated every day, to develop its fight against Russian "fake news" into an official strategy.

The Information Security Doctrine openly states that its elaboration and adoption is a reaction to Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine and that its main goal is to create an information strategy for Ukraine and an information barrier against Russian propaganda.[5] For implementation of the Doctrine's provisions, the document regulates the division of responsibilities between numerous official bodies: the Cabinet of Ministers, the National Security and Defense Council, the Ministry of Information Policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ukrainian Security Service, the State Special Communications Services and the National Institute for Strategic Studies.[6]

The Information Security Doctrine was created as a comprehensive strategy to counter Kremlin propaganda. It has, however, raised considerable concerns stemming from the dilemma of whether more security measures[7] can be implemented at the cost of personal freedoms, primarily the freedom of expression. Opinions expressed not only by the political opposition to the current Ukrainian ruling elite, but also by members of civil society, including Amnesty International[8] and the Internet Association of Ukraine, have raised concerns that the new Doctrine not only counters Kremlin propaganda but can also lead to excessive control of the Internet by the state.[9] Despite this criticism, the Doctrine has been in force since February. Its provisions were among the factors that led to the decision to ban the Russian social media portals VKontakte and Odnoklassniki in Ukraine as internet sources which extensively promote anti-Ukrainian propaganda, a move yet again perceived as controversial. Thorbjorn Jagland, the head of the Council of Europe, even stated that banning Russian social media websites contradicted the "common

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[2] Ukraine says it warned Facebook of Russia fake news in 2015, *Financial Times*, https://www.ft.com/content/c63d76d4-bd1e-11e7-b8a3-38a6e068f464

[3] President approved Information Security Doctrine of Ukraine, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-zatverdiv-doktrinu-informacijnoyi-bezpeki-ukr-40190

[4] В Киеве обсудили проект Концепции информбезопасности страны, *Nova Vlada*, http://novavlada.info/gosudarstvo/v-kieve-obsudili-proekt-koncepcii-informbezopasnosti-strany

[5] President approved Information Security Doctrine of Ukraine, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-zatverdiv-doktrinu-informacijnoyi-bezpeki-ukr-40190

[6] Ukraine's Information Security Doctrine: A Breakthrough or the Veneer of Change?, *The Jamestown Foundation*, https://jamestown.org/program/ukraines-information-security-doctrine-breakthrough-veneer-change/

[7] The question remains of what is the long-lasting strategy of the Ukrainian ruling elite with regard to the implementation of the doctrine. Does it want to use provisions of the doctrine purely to counter Russian disinformation, or may the temptation of using the doctrine's provisions lead to strengthening the power of the ruling elite by increasing control over Ukrainian society and political opposition

[8] Указ Порошенко загрожує свободі слова – Amnesty International, *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*, https://dt.ua/UKRAINE/ukaz-poroshenko-zagrozhuye-svobodi-slova-amnesty-international-234750_.html

[9] Ukraine's Information Security Doctrine: A Breakthrough or the Veneer of Change?, *The Jamestown Foundation*, https://jamestown.org/program/ukraines-information-security-doctrine-breakthrough-veneer-change/

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understanding of freedom of expression."[10]. Moreover, more than half (58%) of Ukrainians do not support this decision, according to the opinion poll by GfK Ukraine and the Center for Insights in Survey Research.[11] Other results of implementing the Doctrine are yet to be seen, but one can state that its provision and current implementation are not the best promotion of the Ukrainian state's approach to countering Russian misinformation.

Separate criticism has been raised against the Ministry of Information Policy, a governmental body established in 2015, which is supposed to play a key role in implementing the Information Security Doctrine. The Ministry has to face a series of concerns, such as capacity shortages (29 employees, 4 million UAH initial budget) and limited delegation of power, which narrows its possibility to work effectively. The biggest problem, however, is, that according to many journalists and activists the Ministry should have never been created in the first place; it was established without proper public consultation and under fears that its modus operandi would lead to the restriction of the freedom of speech. The Ministry of Information Policy has never recovered from these accusations. It remains unpopular among many activists and journalists, who sometimes call it "Ministry of Truth" with reference to Georg Orwell's novel "1984"[12]

Despite the controversies over provisions of the Information Security Doctrine, one should not neglect the fact that the strategic communication of the Ukrainian government aimed at countering Kremlin disinformation has been slowly progressing. For instance, a number of actions have been implemented by the Ministry of Information Policy[13] or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[14] The conclusion of the Strategic Communications Partnership Road Map between Ukraine and NATO in October 2015 was also an important step.[15] In the document, both sides agreed that the NATO Public Diplomacy Division would support Ukraine in the implementation of goals that would lead to the improvement of Ukraine's strategic communications. One example of this cooperation are the Strategic Communications courses for SBU officers that started in 2016 at the National Academy of the Security Service of Ukraine.

Non-state actors: many activities, moderate recognition

Having to counter the Kremlin's propaganda while at the same time debunking fake news has been a serious concern of Ukrainian non-governmental organizations. Civil society has been quicker and more efficient than the government at reacting, targeting and revealing deliberate Russian disinformation on Ukraine propagated both in Ukraine and in other countries. A number of projects have been established to counter the problem of manipulation from different angles – to debunk Kremlin fake news in Ukraine, to reveal untrue stories about Ukraine abroad or to generally monitor

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[10] Ukraine bans its top social networks because they are Russian, *The Economist* https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21722360-blocking-websites-may-be-pointless-it-could-help-president-poroshenkos-popularity-ukraine

[11] Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine, September 14 – October 10, 2017, *International Republican Institute*, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-11-28_ukraine_poll_presentation.pdf

[12] Analyzing the Ground Zero. What Western Countries can Learn From Ukrainian Experience of Combating Russian Disinformation, *European Values,* http://www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Analyzing-the-Ground-Zero..pdf, pp. 6-7

[13] For instance: http://mip.gov.ua/en/content/proekti-yaki-realizovani-za-pidtrimki-mip.html

[14] For instance: http://mfa.gov.ua/en/page/open/id/5026; http://mfa.gov.ua/en/page/open/id/4130

[15] Strategic Communications Partnership Road Map between the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine and the NATO International Staff,http://mfa.gov.ua/mediafiles/sites/nato/files/Roadmap_Eng.pdf

actions originating from Russia that may be harmful to the image of Ukraine. These efforts have been supplemented by projects implemented by Ukrainian think tanks on monitoring the Kremlin's soft power influence in Ukraine and other countries.

Although the common goal of countering information manipulation unites a variety of Ukrainian or Ukraine-originated actors, their activities and target groups vary substantially. First, one should mention fact-checking efforts, that is, the verification of the authenticity of information from media outlets.

StopFake is a Ukrainian media platform which specializes in the fact-checking of international news about Ukraine. Its main goal is to verify and refute disinformation and propaganda about events in Ukraine which are circulated in the media outlets of different countries. The organization investigates and debunks fake news related to Ukraine in ten languages and publishes it on dedicated websites and in social media. It also produces "Stop Fake News", a fake-news debunking broadcast, which is available online and aired regularly on about 30 Ukrainian television stations.

DetectorMedia, "watchdog of the Ukrainian media" as it is called by its authors, is more domestically oriented. It monitors and reveals manipulations and misinformation spread in the Ukrainian media by journalists or politicians.

Other groups focus their efforts on delivering information on specific issues. They would include **VoxUkraine**, an analytical platform that shares quality research about the real economic situation of Ukraine, as well as **News of Donbas**, a news agency that delivers accurate information about the situation in the Donbas region.

On the other hand, **InformNapalm**

represents yet another type of activity. It is a volunteer community that conducts investigations aimed at debunking Kremlin disinformation or identifying Kremlin-connected covert activities. Using open source data collection, InformNapalm has investigated topics such as the Russian intervention in Syria, the crash of the Malaysian Airlines Boeing over Donbas in July 2014 and Kremlin-backed protests in Poland. Another organization, **Information Resistance**, tries to cover both analytical work and investigative activities. This non-governmental organization also directs its efforts at debunking fake news.

Although Ukrainian non-state actors have the capacity for countering manipulated information, one can argue that they lack international recognition. With the exceptions of StopFake and InformNapalm, knowledge about the other organizations is limited to the relatively small groups of experts who either follow the situation in Ukraine closely or specialize in the topic of Kremlin propaganda.

StopFake is an especially interesting example. The group received a serious promotional boost and attention from the international media when it became apparent that Russia was involved in meddling with the U.S. election. Articles about its work appeared in *Politico*[16] and *The New York Times.*[17] Recognition of the importance of StopFake's knowledge and experience followed. In September 2017, StopFake journalists took part in the U.S. Congressional hearing entitled *The Scourge of Disinformation*, where Russia's goals in its hybrid warfare were discussed. Among the factors that helped to raise StopFake's visibility was its focus on reaching out to an international audience. By monitoring foreign media outlets, its

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[16] Ukraine's fight against fake news goes global, *Politico*, https://www.politico.eu/article/on-the-fake-news-frontline/
[17] To Battle Fake News, Ukrainian Show Features Nothing but Lies, *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/26/world/europe/ukraine-kiev-fake-news.html

volunteers were able to show that it is not only Ukraine that is susceptible to media manipulation – this vulnerability is present in other countries as well. This move raised awareness by exposing people to the truth that similar manipulations of facts happen "at home" as well, and not just "somewhere else," like in far-away Ukraine.

Other organizations which either direct their work to different target audiences (such as the expert community or people following Ukrainian media only) or concentrate on monitoring the situation within Ukraine have not achieved this level of international recognition. To promote their work, other mechanisms and channels of sharing their expertise need to be developed.

Lack of trust in expertise

The belated and controversial politics of the Ukrainian government in countering propaganda and the rather limited recognition of Ukrainian non-governmental efforts to stop information manipulation are important, but they are not the only factors that have contributed to Ukraine's modest role in the "industry" of fighting disinformation. The general problem is that although many countries have already acknowledged the problem of "alternative facts" spreading in the internet, they are lagging behind in the implementation of appropriate measures for countering it. To mitigate the flood of fake news, an advanced coordination of various stakeholders, such as governments, security agencies, online corporations (Facebook, Google) and non-governmental actors is necessary. This process is only at the very early stages now and is facing obstacles and resistance, especially from social media platforms, which are the main carriers of fake news.[18] The consequences

for Ukraine are twofold. Firstly, its influence on other countries as regards how to counter propaganda is limited because the process of effective "debunking" in the West is still in its early stages. Secondly, if used appropriately, the current situation gives the Ukrainian side an enormous chance to be involved in the process of creating international mechanisms to counter fake news from the beginning and promote itself as a leader in the field.

But there is another obstacle to overcome. Even if Ukraine is capable of being a role model for countering propaganda (which is still not the case when it comes to government actions and is limited when it comes to non-governmental actors), the question remains: Would others be willing to listen to Ukraine's advice? The stereotypical thinking is that Ukraine is the recipient of support and advice and not someone who has something to offer that might be considered valuable by other partners. It is not unlikely that it may be difficult for other, more developed (both with regard to their economy and democracy) countries to acknowledge that they can learn something from their Ukrainian counterparts, especially on such an unprecedented topic where an entirely new approach to a problem has to be developed. The paradigm, i.e. the reluctance of acquiring knowledge from countries that are traditionally considered to be less-developed, was recently dismissed by the U.S. Congress, which invited StopFake as experts on debunking fake news to its hearing on Russia's hybrid warfare methods, but this example can only be considered an exception, as opposed to a rule.

Conclusions and recommendations

Ukraine as a state is not ready to be a "role-model" for the EU or the USA in countering the Kremlin's manipulations.

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[18] Just one of the examples: German spy agency attacks Facebook and others for failing to tackle fake news, *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/27/germany-spy-agency-facebook-tech-fake-news

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Too many problems need to be overcome first. The Ukrainian government needs to re-evaluate its actions in countering disinformation. Previous activities have been only partly effective. Presumably, one of the biggest problems is that the Ukrainian ruling elite lacks understanding of how to communicate with journalists and activists, whose expertise on how to introduce effective mechanisms of countering Kremlin disinformation is often neglected and not appreciated. This was the case of the Information Security Doctrine; its provisions have been considered controversial by both Ukrainian NGO's and international organizations. The strategy should be revisited and adjusted accordingly to meet recognized standards of protection of freedom of speech. A similar situation happened with the Ministry of Information Policy. Civil society representatives were not satisfactorily involved in the process of the creation of the Ministry, which in turn resulted in resentment against its work and the competences of its employees.

Nevertheless, even with these problems, Ukraine's experience can be of paramount importance for other Eastern Partnership countries. Taking into account the many similar problems these countries face vis-à-vis their relations with Russia, advice coming from Ukraine would definitely prove useful. Problems, such as the controversy over the work of the Ministry of Information Policy are somehow balanced by positive actions, for instance by the support of institutions such as NATO, it is in the process of developing its Strategic Communications aimed at countering disinformation. If other countries intend to develop their own concept of strategic communication, they would do well to consult their Ukrainian partner. In 2017, the Georgian government adopted a communication strategy on Georgia's EU and NATO Membership for 2017-2020. One of the goals of the strategy is the "prevention and reduction of the influence

of anti-Western propaganda on the population."[19] The Ukrainian government, has sufficient knowledge to offer an exchange of experience to their Georgian counterparts on how to approach this issue.

The situation is a little different with non-governmental organizations. In many cases they are experienced enough to be considered role models for fighting disinformation by organizations in the EaP, the EU and the USA. The work of these organizations covers a variety of activities and multiple target groups. They do news fact-checking, open-source investigations and analytical research. They are increasingly engaging in media literacy projects. What is needed now is support from the Ukrainian state and other actors (for instance, the EU) to raise the visibility of these efforts. While StopFake and InformNapalm are already recognizable beyond Ukraine's borders, other groups that are involved in analyzing and fighting

disinformation could use a further PR boost. New ways of communicating between organizations (from Ukraine and from other countries) and between organizations and the general public should be established. Platforms of communication should include: an annual conference on debunking fake news organized in Ukraine; a series of international events in European countries devoted to the promotion of Ukrainian initiatives and projects that deal with countering manipulation; an online platform promoting Ukrainian efforts (in English and preferably other languages) and their achievements in monitoring and fighting propaganda; video channels targeting an international audience.

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[19]Communication Strategy of the Government of Georgia on Georgia's EU and NATO Membership for 2017-2020, http://www.eu-nato.gov.ge/sites/default/files/EU-NATO%20Communication%20Strategy_ENG%20Final%20version.pdf

The next step for the Ukrainian government and non-governmental actors would be to implement a common coordinated plan aimed at maximizing Ukraine's presence wherever new models for fighting disinformation are discussed. In practical terms, it means a presence and lobbying in all important capitals (such as Washington, Berlin, Paris, London, Brussels) of countries that are coming to acknowledge that propaganda is a real issue. The first target should probably be Washington, where the U.S. administration is now considering taking appropriate measures (legislation) to increase general transparency and mitigate fake news in the social media.

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